

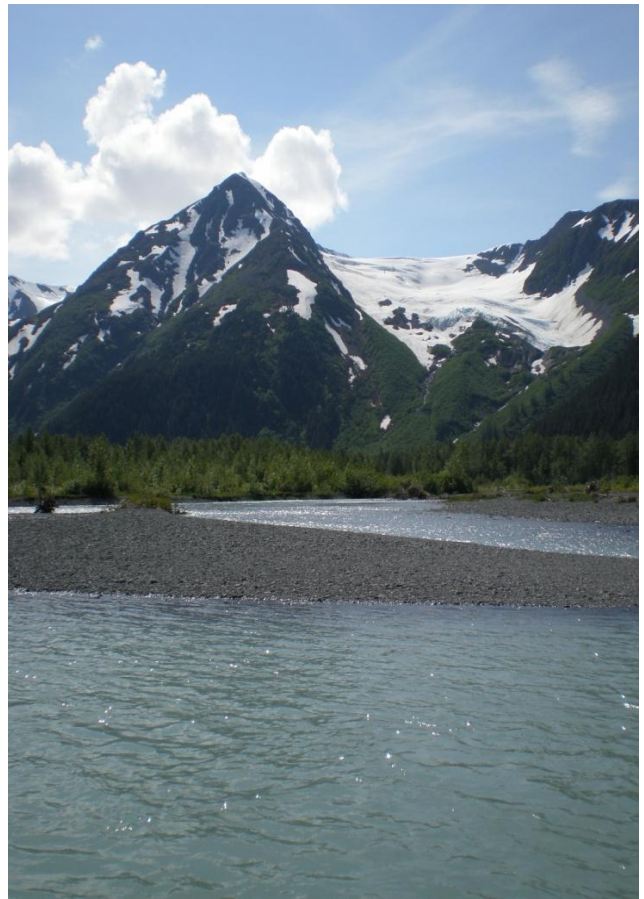
Evaluation of Issues and Management Recommendations for the Three Rivers Area



Placer River



Twentymile River



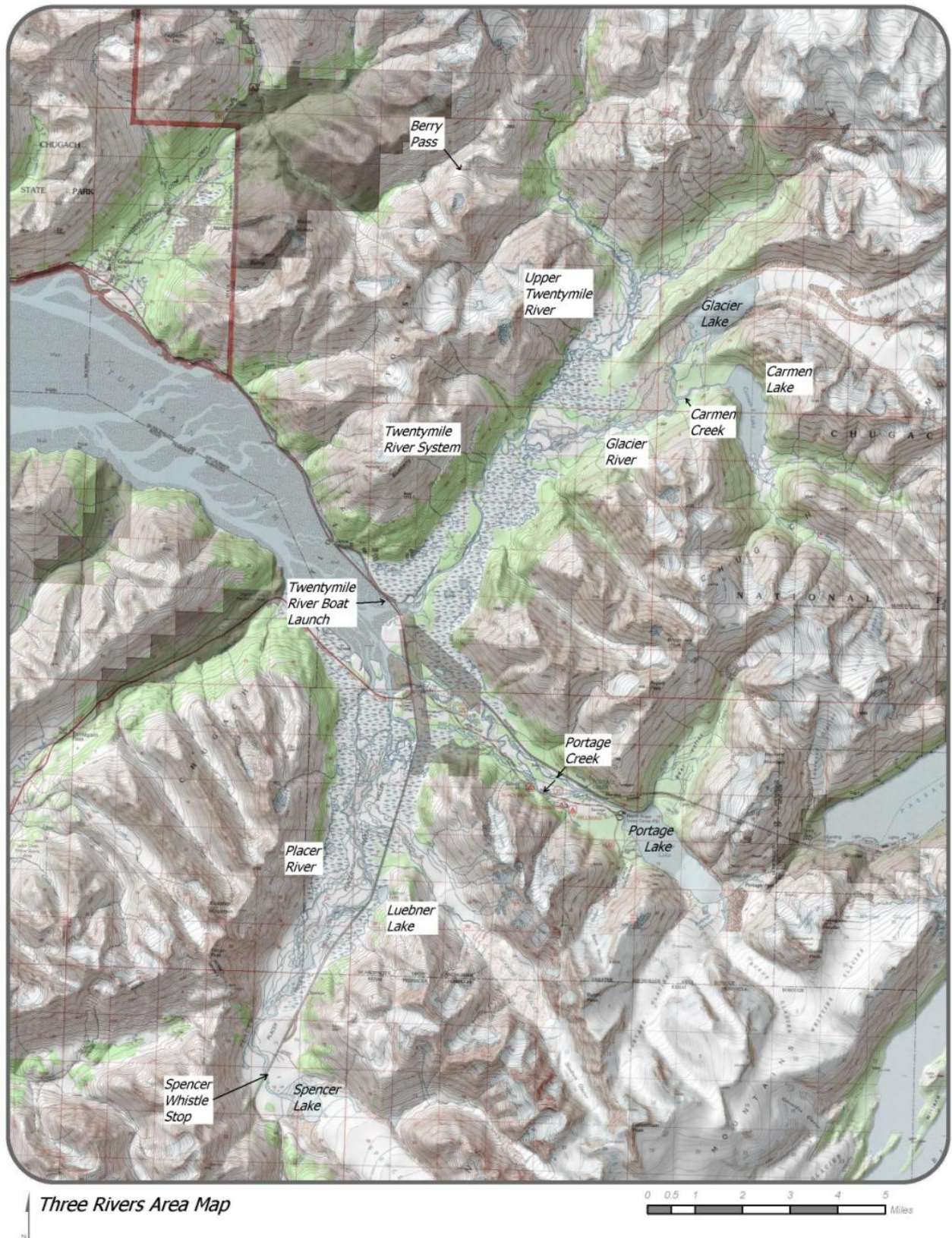
Portage Creek

September 2010
Glacier Ranger District
Chugach National Forest

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Evaluation of Issue and Management Recommendations for the Three Rivers Area



Note: Boundaries represented on the map are not necessarily exact. This map should not be used to determine private property boundaries or access to public lands.

1. Purpose and Need

Purpose

The purpose of the Three Rivers evaluation is to describe management recommendations that will provide the setting for a variety of high-quality water-based summer recreational opportunities on the Twentymile River system, Placer River and Spencer Lake, and Portage Creek. This plan addresses recreational uses on all water bodies associated with each stream and is in accordance with direction in the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Management Plan (2002).

Need

Three needs were identified to meet the overall intent of the evaluation. These needs recognize the past, current, and anticipated issues on the streams that prompted the Glacier Ranger District to conduct an assessment and planning process for recreational activities. They were refined throughout the evaluation as more information was gathered. Each need will be discussed in greater detail in section 3 of this document. These needs are:

1. Provide a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreation experiences, including a balance between commercial and non-commercial use across the three rivers area
2. Enhance existing and future recreational opportunities
3. Protect the ecological integrity of the river systems

Evaluation Process

The Glacier Ranger District (GRD) gathered data for this evaluation through a number of different methods. Quantitative and qualitative recreational use data were gathered through a creel survey and the placement of motion-activated cameras at various points on Twentymile River. Staff members also tracked the number of vehicles in parking lots that serve as access points for the rivers, with a focus on the Twentymile boat launch site. Fisheries staff evaluated Chinook spawning habitat in the Carmen River, and ecologists inventoried invasive weed locations along all three rivers. A team from the GRD also met several times to discuss issues emerging throughout the Three Rivers evaluation process. District leadership met with outfitters and guides (O/G) in March 2009 to receive their input early in the process. The GRD also received comments from the public through a scoping period in April and May 2009 and at a public meeting in late May.

The importance of engaging state agencies throughout the planning process was identified early. Forest Service leadership met with representatives from the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), and the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) to discuss issues of mutual interest. One important discussion point is ownership of the Twentymile boat launch site; both the Forest Service and State of Alaska claim ownership of this site. Communication about this and other topics has had a direct impact on the

planning process and recommendations made in this document, which are described in more detail in section 3.

Timeline of events

| | |
|------------------|---|
| 2006 April | Twentymile River Capacity Analysis completed |
| 2006 – 07 summer | Twentymile River recreational use monitoring |
| 2008 summer | Field monitoring (recreation, fisheries, ecology) |
| August 18 | Forest Service and DNR/ADF&G reps meet |
| October 30 | GRD team meets |
| December 18 | Forest Service and DNR/ADF&G meet |
| 2009 February | Placer River/Spencer Lake Capacity Study completed |
| March 30 | GRD team meets with O/Gs |
| April – May | Public scoping |
| May 27 | Public meeting in Girdwood |
| June 10 | GRD team meets to discuss public input |
| June – August | Field monitoring (recreation) |
| July 22 | Access point field trip with state representatives, including DOT |
| September 21 | Forest Service, BLM, DNR, DOT meet regarding Twentymile boat launch |
| November | Portage Creek Capacity Study completed |
| December | First draft of plan completed |

2. Existing Conditions

This section provides an overview of the recreation and natural resource conditions based on studies and observations over the past five to ten years. For a more detailed description of the three river valleys, see The Upper Turnagain Landscape Assessment (USFS 2004).

Recreation

Twentymile River System

Twentymile River is a popular destination for both anglers and sightseeing trips. Motorized use dominates on Twentymile for both commercial and non-commercial users. Commercial use increased on Twentymile from 600 user days in 2003 to 1250 user days in 2007-2008, primarily due to an increase in commercial motorized sightseeing trips throughout the river complex. 2009 saw a reduction in commercial use, as O/Gs reported using a total of 604 days. Non-commercial use is highest during the coho salmon (late July – August) and hooligan (May – early June) seasons. Most hooligan netters are walk-in and do not use a boat. Pack rafting from near the headwaters to the mouth of Twentymile River has increased on the river since the Upper Winner Creek Trail to Berry Pass was constructed.

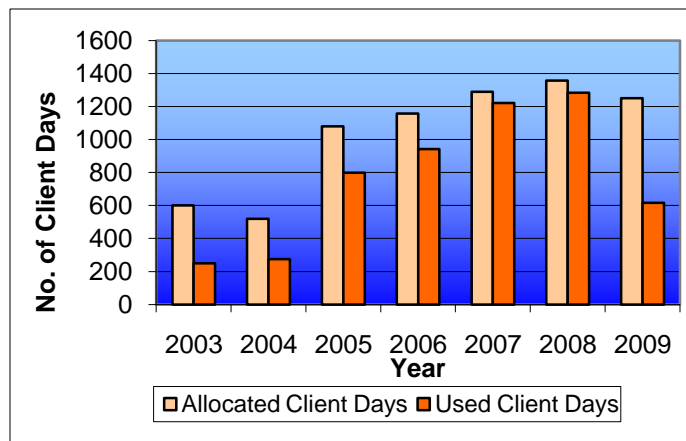


Figure 1. Commercial use on Twentymile, from 2003-2009. Almost all of this use is motorized, with a mix of sightseeing and fishing trips.

Creel surveys taken during August – September 2007 and June – September 2008 provide some descriptive information regarding recreational use on Twentymile. Non-commercial use generally exceeded commercial use, particularly during the peak seasons (late July – August). Over 80% of surveyed trips in 2008 were non-commercial. This was due to the high number of non-commercial users, but also because the number of permitted user days for O/Gs is limited by the Forest Service. Use was highest along the main and upper fork of the Twentymile, and lower on the Glacier and Carmen River forks throughout the summer. Fishing is by far the most popular activity, followed by sightseeing.

Data from creel surveys, vehicle counts in the parking lot, and photos reveal that use on Twentymile often met or exceeded capacity (capacity is based on a single user encountering fewer than 15 other groups in one trip) in August, but remained under capacity during the rest of the season. In August, river users reported seeing more than 15 boats on 46% of the days (6 out of 13) when creel surveys were taken in August 2007, and on 33% of the days (5 out of 15) in August 2008. Based on a capacity of 15 vehicles with trailers, the parking lot was often near or

above capacity during the peak hooligan and coho salmon seasons each year from 2006-2009. Weekends tend to have the highest amount of use. Fishing trips, both commercial and non-commercial, stayed on the river longer than sightseeing trips (4.5 hours and 3 hours respectively) and typically observed more boats as a result.

| Recreational Boat Trips on Twentymile (by type) 2007-2008 | | | | | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| | 7/31/07 – 9/9/07 | 6/18/08 - 7/10/08 | 7/11/08 - 8/31/08 | 9/1/08 - 9/20/08 | TOTAL |
| Commercially-guided fishing | 23 | 2 | 29 | 2 | 56 |
| Non-guided fishing | 123 | 6 | 252 | 29 | 410 |
| Guided sightseeing | 26 | 10 | 35 | 4 | 75 |
| Non-guided sightseeing | 20 | 7 | 47 | 2 | 76 |
| Camping | 4 | 2 | 12 | 2 | 20 |
| Hunting | 3 | | 3 | | 6 |

Table 1. Recreational boat trips on Twentymile River by type of activity, as captured on creel surveys. Surveys were administered at the Twentymile boat launch every from 10:00 AM to dusk in 2007 and 12:00 PM – 10:00 PM in 2008, on every other day during the peak season and twice weekly (one weekday, one weekend day) in the shoulder seasons.

Placer River and Spencer Lake

Little data is available on Placer River because no surveys or monitoring has taken place. The information here is based on Forest Service staff observations and O/G use reports. Non-motorized commercial use dominates on Placer River and Spencer Lake. Prior to 2003, Placer River had little O/G or public use. In 2003, Chugach Adventure Guides (CAG) began offering a rail/raft excursion in cooperation with the Alaska Railroad that runs from Spencer Lake to a train pick up near Luebner Lake. CAG is currently allotted 5000 user days and used approximately 3000 days per year from 2005 to 2008, dropping to around 1400 days in 2009. Non-commercial non-motorized use has increased in 2008 and 2009 because of the rail service to Spencer Whistle Stop. However, the railroad will only allow deflated, easily moved boats to be transported, limiting use to small rafts, pack rafts and inflatable kayaks. During the coho salmon fishing and duck hunting seasons (August and September), motorized use is common between the mouth of the river and Luebner Lake.

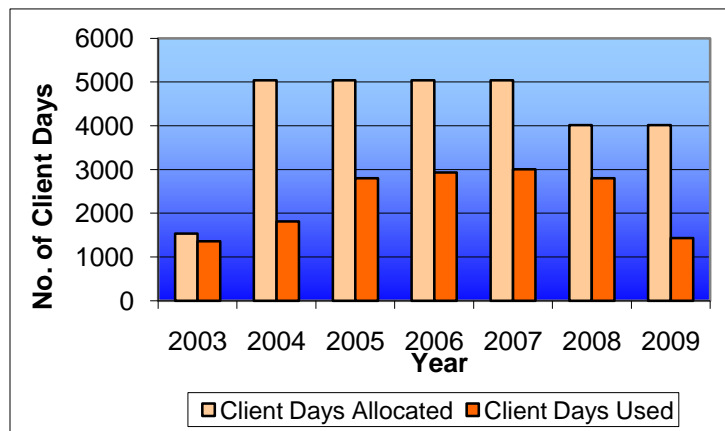


Figure 2. Commercial use on Placer River from 2003 to 2009. Almost all of this use is non-motorized.

Portage Creek

Little data is available on Portage Creek because no surveys or monitoring has taken place. The information here is based on Forest Service staff observations and O/G use reports. Non-

motorized use dominates on Portage Creek most of the season, and most of this use is non-commercial. CAG has the highest commercial use on Portage, ranging between 100 to 200 user days per year. This use has generally declined since operations on Placer River started, though use was higher in 2009, possibly because these trips cost less than other guided options and appealed to more cost-conscious visitors. Private landowners have noted that non-commercial motorized use has increased significantly in the past 3-5 years along the lower stretch of the creek during prime fishing times, especially August. Another important use of Portage Creek is its scenic vistas for people traveling on the railroad and Portage Highway.

The predominant boat use on Portage Lake is by the M/V Ptarmigan, a special-use authorized glacier cruise boat that can carry 200 passengers on 5 scheduled trips daily from ice-out in mid May until late September. Public use on the lake is regulated by a forest order which allows paddle-powered craft along the shoreline between Bear Valley and Portage Pass trail.

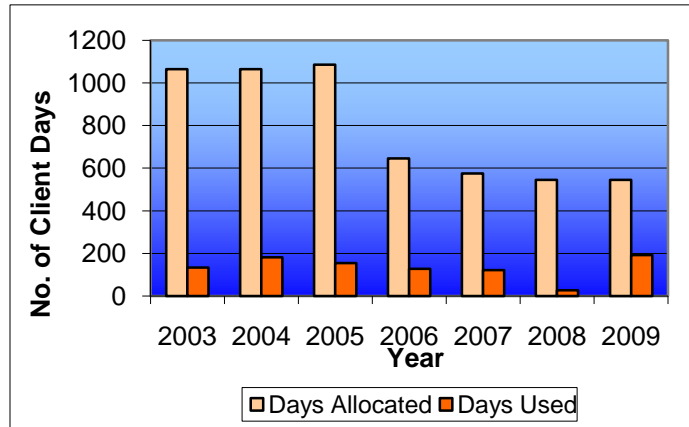


Figure 3. Commercial use on Portage Creek. All of this use is non-motorized.

Resources

Chinook salmon spawning habitat in Carmen River

In 2008, the GRD conducted studies to identify Chinook salmon spawning habitat in the Carmen River. There is concern that increased jet boat use in the Twentymile River system, especially on the Carmen River, may impact a small population of Chinook salmon that use the area for spawning. The Chinook study identified more than twenty spawning areas in the 1.4 mile long Carmen River, and also found some signs of uplands resource degradation at popular fishing holes. Due to variable hydrologic conditions and poor visibility in 2009, the second year of the study was not completed. The impact of jet boats on Chinook salmon spawning habitat in Carmen River remains uncertain, though there is still a concern that increased motorized use may have a negative impact.

Hooligan fishery

The eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*), or hooligan, fishery is a popular personal use fishery that draws Alaskans from hundreds of miles away to Twentymile each spring, usually in May to early June. Limited data describing the fishery has been gathered since the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service completed a report in 2003 (Spangler et al. 2003). The report notes that there has been concern about the decline of eulachon, but too little is known about population dynamics or the ecology to validate these claims (Spangler et al. 2003, 1-3). While ADF&G reports listed total average annual catch over the previous two decades at 3700 kg,

based on post-harvest mail-in surveys, Spangler et al. (2003, 41) reported that the catch totaled just under 15,000 kg in 2002. Hooligan are also an important food source for bald eagles and beluga whales, which can be seen following the run up Turnagain Arm.

Parking, waste management, and safety are major concerns at the mouth of Twentymile River during the hooligan run. The Twentymile parking lot fills up quickly, leading people to park within the Alaska Railroad and Seward Highway rights-of-way. There have been problems with both litter and human waste in the past as well. The GRD has placed a port-a-potty at the boat launch for the past two years to mitigate the human waste issue, though littering continues to be a problem.

Invasive plant inventory

Results from the systematic inventory of invasives along the banks of all three rivers showed that the Twentymile river system had the most invasives, especially around the private cabins (most common were *Leucanthemum vulgare* (oxeye daisy) and *Taraxicum officianale* (common dandelion)). Invasives were also found all the way from Carmen Lake to the mouth of the river. The crew found fewer invasive plants in Portage Valley and the lowest number along the Placer River, though some were found at Spencer and near Luebner Lake at the rafting take-out site. Invasive plants were also found around campsites. The common dandelion was the most frequently encountered non-native plant, present in 22.5% of all plots and in every waterway surveyed. There are currently no cleaning stations or information about invasive plants available at the river access points.

Forest Plan Direction

The Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (USFS 2002; hereafter Forest Plan) provides direction on how these rivers are to be managed. The Forest Plan includes forest-wide goals and objectives, management area prescriptions that guide management actions in certain geographic areas, and Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classes used to manage areas for certain recreational experiences. One goal listed in the Forest Plan is to “maintain areas where natural quiet predominates consistent with the management area direction and Recreation Opportunity Spectrum settings”, and to provide both motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities (3-9). Another goal states that the CNF will “manage rivers recommended for Wild and Scenic River designation to maintain their outstandingly remarkable values pending congressional designation” (3-11). In the Revised Plan, Twentymile is recommended as a Scenic River, while Portage is recommended as a Recreational River.

Due to their eligibility and recommendation for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System, Twentymile and Portage are managed to “protect their free flowing characteristics, tentative classification and outstandingly remarkable values [ORV]” (3-11). The ORV for the Twentymile River are the “synergistic effects of the wetland, lake, and river complex within the

Twentymile Valley” (Revised Plan FEIS, D-28); for Portage Creek the ORV are “scenery and visual features and recreational values” (Revised Plan FEIS, D-37).

Four management area prescriptions and associated Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) categories apply to the Three Rivers area as follows:

| Stream Name | Management Area | ROS |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Twentymile River | Scenic River (#231) | Primitive to Semi-Primitive Motorized |
| Placer River/Spencer Lake | Backcountry (#210) | |
| Portage Creek | Recreational River (#331) | Semi-Primitive Nonmotorized to Roaded Natural |
| Mouth of all three streams | Fish, Wildlife and Recreation (#312) | |

The Semi-Primitive ROS class states that a visitor should have fewer than 15 encounters per day with other visitors, and group size is limited to no larger than 24. In the Roaded Natural ROS class, visitors may experience more than 15 encounters on the river and less than 15 encounters on the shoreline, and there is no limit to group size.

More detailed references to Forest Plan guidance are provided under each issue below. The recreational capacity analyses also provide information about management areas and ROS classes.

3. Issues and Recommendations

This section describes a series of issues that arose during the assessment and planning process, including comments and concerns from O/Gs, other members of the public, and Forest Service staff. Each issue is associated with one or more of the plan's needs, and includes a brief description, some background information providing detail on how the issue arose, a context section explaining Forest Plan guidance and public input, and recommendations for how to manage or mitigate the issue.

Need 1: Provide a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities, including a balance between commercial and non-commercial use, across the three rivers area.

Issue 1. Meeting the demand for quality motorized recreation opportunities in the three rivers area.

Background

Increased motorized use, both commercial and non-commercial, on Twentymile has been the most controversial issue during the evaluation process. Commercial motorized trips have more than doubled on Twentymile River in the past five years. O/Gs with permits have consistently requested more use on the Twentymile River, and have also requested new use on Portage and Placer. Capacity for commercial use was met every year except for 2009, when numbers declined about the same amount as the Alaska tourism industry in general. As the economy recovers, O/Gs feel that demand will once again increase, but their amount of use is not permitted to grow under the current capacity limits. O/Gs are concerned that the amount of use authorized by the Forest Service limits the viability of commercial operations and some believe the manner in which unused days are re-distributed is not fair. At the same time, non-commercial users have expressed their concerns about the change in experience on Twentymile when commercial jet boat tours began.

Context

Forest Plan

One of the forest-wide goals is to “maintain quality settings for motorized recreation opportunities” (3-8). The applicable management area prescriptions do not explicitly restrict motorized use on the waterways, and all ROS classes state that motorboats are allowed. Both the Scenic River and Backcountry Management Areas, however, are supposed to provide good opportunities for quiet recreation. Commercial use is limited to 50% of total capacity on Twentymile and Placer Rivers, and 40% on Portage Creek. There is no guidance concerning the ratio of motorized to non-motorized use on the waterways.

Public comments

O/Gs explained that motorized trips are easier to market than non-motorized trips, and that these trips have been the foundation of their business plans. The Forest Service received numerous comments from happy customers of one commercial guide during the Twentymile River Capacity Analysis process. Permitted use limits established by the Forest Service have forced some O/Gs to alter the types and duration of trips that they offer. The O/G providing rafting trips down Placer River did not want to see commercial motorized use above Luebner Lake because increased motorized use on the upper portion of the river would impact the float experience and could increase safety concerns.

Public comments on the creel surveys taken in 2007 and 2008 provide further information about visitors' experiences on Twentymile River. Most of the visitor use information on the creel survey is from motorized boaters. In general, visitors expressed more concern about the amount of use on the river during the peak season in 2007 than in 2008, particularly concerning commercial sightseeing trips. In 2008, the highest percentage of negative comments occurred prior to the peak season when the number of encounters is lowest, with 70% (7 of 10) of the visitors commenting negatively about other use on the river. One possible explanation is that users before and after the peak season have higher expectations to experience solitude.

During the peak season in 2008, visitors seemed to enjoy their experience. Out of 378 people surveyed, 30 visitors made negative comments concerning other use on the river. A majority of campers (6 of 8) who provided comments felt that use levels were detrimental to their experience. There were no negative comments from commercially-guided sightseers, while some commercially-guided anglers wanted less guided sightseeing use.

During public scoping in 2009, several members of the public expressed a desire to see no more increase in commercial motorized use, especially on Twentymile, citing safety, noise, resource degradation and disturbance of other visitors and wildlife as key reasons. They feel that their experience on that river has changed since more commercial use has been authorized, and that some users have been displaced completely. Other comments suggested that no motorized use on Portage Creek should be allowed except for access to adjacent private lands.

Recommendations

Twentymile River

1. Twentymile should be managed as a mixed-use river, with a goal of providing quality motorized opportunities. Sustain the quality of commercial and non-commercial motorized trips on Twentymile River by reducing encounters and improving the opportunities for solitude. Permitted use should remain at 2008 levels, with commercial use focused on Carmen and Glacier Rivers. No new commercial motorized trips should be authorized on the upper Twentymile River to provide quality opportunities for non-commercial use of this area.

2. The Forest Service could establish “non-commercial days” on the Twentymile to offer enhanced non-commercial motorized opportunities and reduce encounters with high-powered jet boats.
3. Ensure the Twentymile safety plan is implemented to provide for safe two-way traffic.
4. If the current amount and allocation of authorized commercial use on the Twentymile does not meet the needs of existing O/Gs, the Forest Service may issue a prospectus to competitively award current authorized use levels to fewer O/Gs, or even a single O/G.

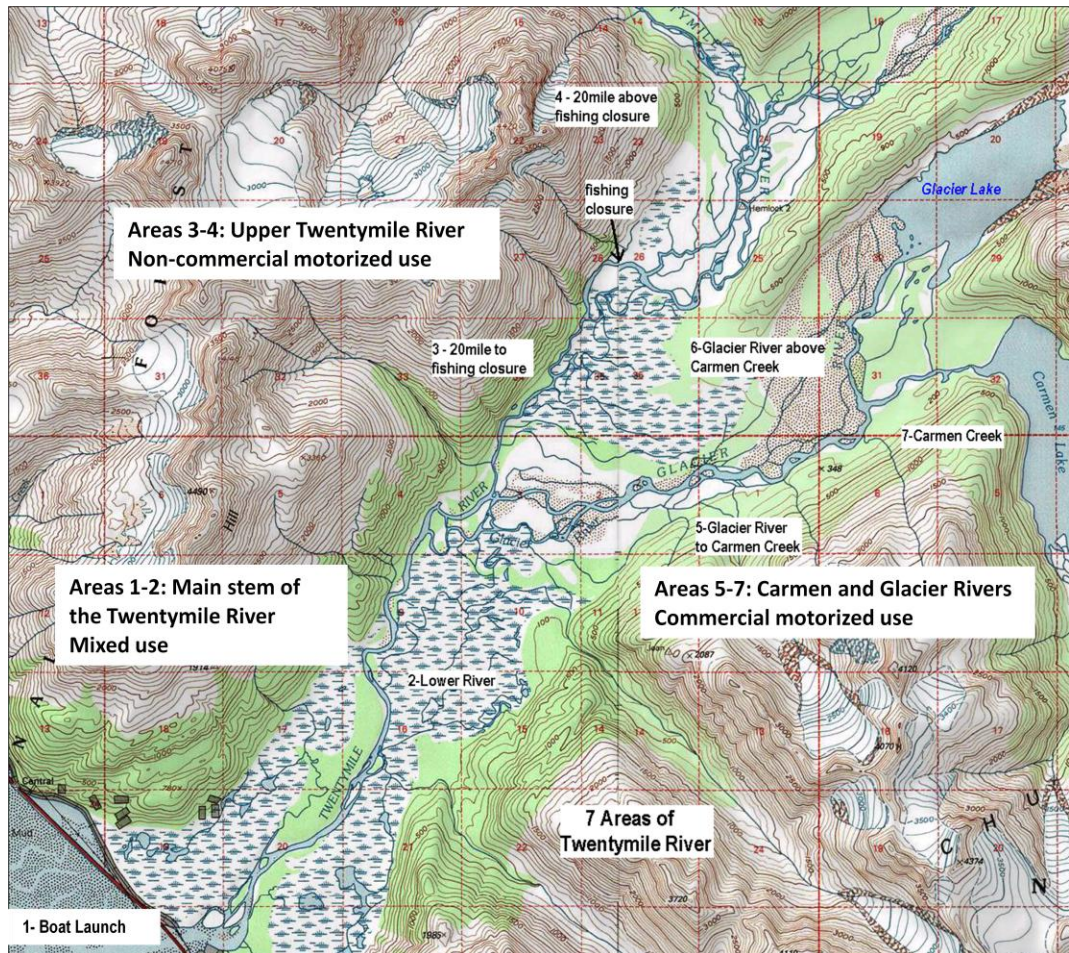


Figure 4. Management recommendations for motorized opportunities on Twentymile River, by section of river. Non-commercial motorized and all types of non-motorized use should be allowed on all areas of the river.

Placer River

1. Commercial motorized trips should not be permitted on Placer River. There has been less motorized use on Placer River compared to Twentymile River and the waterway is very shallow in several areas, making it less desirable for motorized trips. Once the Luebner Lake Whistle Stop is built, assess the demand for commercial motorized boat access to this stop. If demand is high, commercial motorized access should be considered only for the lower portion of the river, ending at Luebner Lake.

2. Continue to allow non-commercial motorized use. Placer River could be managed as an opportunity for non-commercially guided fishing to relieve some of the pressure on the Twentymile system.
3. Monitor recreational use to develop baseline data for motorized use on Placer River. This can be done through the use of motion-activated cameras. Camera data should be verified by personal observation at least twice monthly. Monitoring should be focused on the peak season (August), which coincides with the coho salmon run.

Portage Creek

1. Commercial motorized trips should not be permitted on Portage Creek. This creek is not conducive to heavy motorized use because of several shallow areas, there has not historically been demand for commercial access, and private landowners have also expressed concerns about the overall amount of use.
2. Non-commercial motorized trips will continue to be allowed.
3. Monitor recreational use to develop baseline data for motorized use on Portage Creek. Follow the same guidance as given for Placer River monitoring. This monitoring should also capture non-motorized use.

Issue 2: Meeting the demand for quality non-motorized trips in the three rivers area.

Background

All three rivers are relatively gentle, although each one contains hazards including snags, sweepers, Class I-II rapids, and extremely cold water. Motorized boat travel also increases the level of risk on these rivers for non-motorized users, especially on Twentymile. The primary access points to Twentymile and Placer Rivers have been the parking areas along the Seward Highway, at the mouths of both rivers. While non-motorized users have ridden the tide several miles upstream, and lined or fought the current to reach further upstream, the majority of upstream use has been by people using motorized boats.

Over the past five years, access at points upstream have been developed, including the Upper Winner Creek trail that connects Girdwood to Upper Twentymile via Berry Pass (a 10+ mile hike), and the Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop, located near the Placer River, about a mile downstream of Spencer Lake. Additional hike-in access points are planned for Twentymile as part of the Iditarod National Historic Trail, and the Luebner Lake Whistle Stop will add another trail access point for Placer River. These recent improvements have increased the amount of non-motorized use on the rivers; planned access improvements will likely add more non-motorized use.

Portage Creek has several access points for non-motorized users. The newly revised closure order for Portage Lake adds a non-motorized access point for the lake only, and not the creek. The creek access points, including some that are not authorized, are limited to about 3-5 vehicles at a time and are not marked along the road.

Context

Forest Plan

The Forest Plan includes the goal to “expand recreational capacity by developing new recreational facilities and trails in response to user demands and where appropriate to management area objectives” (3-9) and to “maintain quality settings for nonmotorized recreation opportunities” (3-8). The management objectives for all three rivers are appropriate to enhance non-motorized opportunities. Any developments should be concentrated in nodes to reduce the impact on scenery in surrounding areas.

Public comments

Several people made comments during the public meeting and scoping process stating their concern about the lack of non-motorized access points, and that floaters are put at risk by two-way motorized travel. Two people argued that the Twentymile boat launch was not safe for launching kayaks, and that the site previously used (owned by the Alaska Railroad) was being used by a jet boat operator. Another person suggested that Placer River be “opened up” to more use in order to relieve pressure on the Portage Valley. O/Gs are also interested in utilizing improved access by offering non-motorized trip packages as part of the Whistle Stop Project and to a lesser extent, pack rafting trips over Berry Pass. Although the latter may be less popular commercially, three people suggested that this route would become a top destination for non-commercial pack rafting. Finally, several people mentioned that they enjoy making trips on Portage Creek.

Recommendations

Twentymile River

1. Continue to improve non-motorized access points as the INHT is developed adjacent to the river. This will provide more opportunities for commercial and non-commercial non-motorized trips.
2. No new commercial motorized trips should be authorized on the Upper Twentymile River to reduce the likelihood of two-way traffic and enhance the non-motorized experience in this area. See Figure 4 on pg. 12 for a map showing Upper Twentymile River.
2. Ensure that non-motorized users understand that Twentymile is a mixed-use river, and should be ready to encounter and avoid powerboats during their float.

Placer River

1. Promote non-motorized opportunities on Placer River through access points on the Whistle Stop Project, particularly the Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop.
2. Increase commercial non-motorized opportunities on Placer River and Spencer Lake within the scope of the Whistle Stop and river capacity analysis (Appendix B).
3. Gather data at the Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop to better understand the amount of non-commercial non-motorized use on Placer River.

Portage Creek

1. Provide non-motorized opportunities on Portage Creek and Portage Lake.
2. Increase commercial non-motorized opportunities on Portage Creek within the scope of the capacity analysis (Appendix C).
3. An additional put-in at Portage could provide access below the shallowest areas near Portage Lake. This could help make the float less dependent on flow levels.
4. Access points to Portage Creek should be marked along the road so visitors can more easily identify these locations.

Need 2: Enhance existing and future recreational opportunities

Issue 1: Improving access to the water along the Seward Highway

Background

Existing access points to all three rivers are in a relatively unimproved state. The Twentymile parking lot is often at or over capacity during the salmon fishing season, mid July – early September, providing little space for vehicles with trailers to maneuver without re-entering the busy Seward Highway. The boat launch is steep and large ridges form in the glacial silt along the banks, creating significant drop-offs when putting trailers and boats into the water. This boat ramp is the primary launch point for motorized traffic on all three of the rivers in this study. It is also overrun by vehicles and people during the hooligan run from mid-May to early June.

The Placer River boat launch is even steeper than the Twentymile ramp, and is often washed out. The Placer River overflow parking area does not have a boat ramp at all. Despite these shortcomings, Forest Service staff saw more vehicles with trailers at the Placer parking lots during 2009 than in previous years. With the increase in non-motorized use on Placer River, these parking lots are expected to see more use.

The parking lot at the take out for Portage Creek is reached by a short trail through glacial silt, and is on state land. All of the access points along the Seward Highway are immediately before or after a bridge, making egress to and from the highway difficult at best, and often hazardous.

The Alaska Department of Transportation is currently working on a plan to improve the Seward Highway from milepost 75-90, which encompasses the launch points for Twentymile and Placer, as well as the take-out parking area for Portage Creek. This plan is still in its early stages, and little has been done with it during the second half of 2009. Further planning is expected to begin in early 2010. Finally, as mentioned before, the State of Alaska claims ownership of the Twentymile boat launch.

Context

Forest Plan

The Forest Plan directs the Forest Service to maintain quality settings for motorized and non-motorized recreation. The desired condition for the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area includes “improvements to accommodate increased summer recreational use”. These access sites are in the Fish, Wildlife, and Recreation management area with a Roaded Natural ROS class. Boat docks and ramps are appropriate, as well as improving access via roads and trails as necessary. Access to Scenic Rivers may be by road, but roads generally do not parallel the river, while access by road to Recreational Rivers is common.

Public comments

Opinions of land managers, resource specialists, and the public are mixed about improving access to these rivers. Comments made on the creel survey in 2007 and 2008 were evenly divided between those who wanted to see a better boat ramp and parking area at Twentymile and those that liked it as it is because it helps to regulate the number, and skill level of boaters on the river. State and federal fish biologists were concerned that improving access would put additional stress on the Twentymile fishery. On the other hand, vehicles with trailers have very little space to maneuver and some park down on the glacial silt when the parking lot is full. Improving the boat launch at Placer could help relieve pressure on the Twentymile fishery, but will promote increased non-commercial motorized use on the river.

Non-motorized users are concerned about the availability of access at the mouth of Twentymile. They had previously used the area across the road claimed by the Alaska Railroad, but this area was roped off when an O/G had a permit to use that site (the permit has expired). The Alaska Railroad is concerned about trespass along their right of way, especially during the hooligan run, and has expressed an interest in working with the Forest Service to manage this access. The State claims ownership of this area as well.

Recommendations

Twentymile River

1. The Twentymile parking area and boat launch should be redesigned to improve the flow of traffic using the boat launch and parking spots, and to better facilitate launching boats. The lot

could be designed to sustain current levels of parking for vehicles with trailers, and at the same time increase parking for vehicles without trailers during the hooligan fishery.

2. Because of uncertainty surrounding the jurisdiction of the Twentymile parking lot and boat launch area and the impact of DOT's current planning process, these improvements should be offered as recommendations to DOT. The Forest Service should actively participate in the DOT planning process to ensure that public access is sustained, and also work cooperatively with the State and the Alaska Railroad to potentially improve access to Twentymile. The Forest Service should communicate with DOT, the Alaska Railroad, and DNR to identify ways to best manage people and parking during the hooligan season with the existing parking space.

Placer River

Do not make improvements to the Placer River boat launch to try to maintain the status quo for motorized use on this river.

Portage Creek

Communicate with DOT and DNR about improvements to the Portage Creek take-out parking lot located along the Seward Highway. This area could be expanded to help facilitate more non-motorized use on the creek.

Issue 2: Improve safety

Background

Safety is always an issue when it comes to outdoor recreation, particularly in Alaska. These rivers provide challenges for both motorized and non-motorized crafts, and the interplay between the two heightens the risk. At the same time, the Forest Service has limited resources and liability concerns when trying to actively manage safety issues. The issue of safety has come up repeatedly during previous and current planning efforts.

Context

Forest Plan

The Plan does not provide guidance regarding safety, but management area prescriptions, ROS classes, and Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIO) provide guidelines on the appropriate level of development and visible management activities (such as signs and kiosks). In the Backcountry and Scenic River areas, a degree of self-dependence should be maintained and few facilities developed. In areas with more use, management activities may be more evident.

Public comments

Several people, including land managers, O/Gs, and the general public expressed concern over safety on the rivers, especially Twentymile River. 25% of the people providing comments during the 2007 creel survey mentioned safety as a concern. O/Gs have mentioned that they are

often a resource for providing safe trips and for emergency rescues. Two-way traffic along narrow portions of the rivers and at the boat launches are the most often heard safety concerns. There was also a concern about jet boat wakes swamping anglers.

Recommendations

Regardless of the outcome of jurisdictional questions, the State of Alaska and Forest Service have a mutual interest in promoting informed and safety-conscious behavior. These agencies should work together to identify risks and develop educational information for visitors to the rivers. Actions to take include:

1. Full implementation of the Twentymile safety plan.
2. Improve signage at all access points on the Seward Hwy, Portage Glacier Road and at Whistle Stops to include maps and information about general hazards in the river.
3. Recommend a redesign the Twentymile parking lot as part of DOTs plan, to improve traffic flow.

Issue 3: Reducing the impact of human waste and litter

Background

Portage Valley is one of the most heavily visited areas in Alaska during the summer, and during hooligan and Coho salmon runs, river traffic also increases dramatically. Portage Valley and the lower Twentymile area are the most impacted by human waste and litter. During the hooligan fishery, the Forest Service has put a port-a-potty at the Twentymile parking lot, but this is removed prior to the salmon fishing season. In Portage Valley, toilets and trash receptacles are available at the Begich Boggs Visitor Center, Williwaw and Black Bear campgrounds, and at Moose Flats day use area. There are also toilets and trash receptacles at the Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop, and there will be at Luebner Lake Whistle Stop. There are no toilets or trash receptacles at any of the other access points.

Context

Forest Plan

Developments such as toilets are guided by management prescriptions and ROS classes. In Backcountry areas, development should be limited and focused to not impact the overall scenic integrity. In areas where expectations for solitude and self-sufficiency are less, facilities providing comforts are more common (i.e. in Roaded Natural ROS settings). The Recreational River and Fish, Wildlife, and Recreation MAs allow for more improvements to manage larger groups of visitors. The Forest also seeks to promote 'leave no trace' principles through interpretation and education.

Public comments

Two members of the public were concerned about human waste and litter along Portage Creek, stating that it has grown worse in recent years. Another two comments mentioned that they had seen evidence of human waste along Twentymile, and some litter was found during a float on both Twentymile and Portage. These people felt that the ever-increasing traffic on these rivers would make the waste issue even worse. There are also continued concerns from land managers and the public about waste and litter during the hooligan season, though the port-a-potty has helped. Fisheries staff did not see a great deal of waste or litter during their field work in 2007 and 2008.

Recommendations

1. Regardless of the outcome over the jurisdictional question, a toilet facility should be provided at the Twentymile boat launch. At a minimum, the port-a-potty during the hooligan season should continue. The Forest Service should seek partnership opportunities to continue to provide this needed service. Since the State claims jurisdiction, and the Railroad has an interest in directing people away from their lands, these organizations should be encourage to help manage the human waste situation here.
2. The “pack it in, pack it out” concept needs to be actively managed, with Law Enforcement helping to get the message across that this is required, not just a nice thing to do. A few violation notices could go a long way towards making this concept an ingrained habit.
3. Make portable toilets available to borrow from the Glacier Ranger Station and promote their use especially for people camping along the rivers.
4. Staff should float each of the rivers at least once during the peak season to monitor waste issues near the river corridors.
5. Signage at the access points should highlight “leave no trace” principles especially in regards to human wastes along waterways.
6. Monitor the Placer and Portage parking areas to determine if further management actions are needed in these areas.

Issue 4: Jurisdiction of waterways and the Twentymile boat launch point

Background

The State of Alaska claims ownership of the submerged lands beneath navigable waterways based on the Equal Footing doctrine and the Alaska Statehood Act of 1959. Furthermore, based on pre-1964 earthquake photographs and laws concerning shifting boundaries (i.e. avulsion, accretion, fill in tidal areas), the State also claims ownership of the Twentymile boat launch area, parking lot, and the access point across the road managed by the Alaska Railroad. The Forest Service argues that Twentymile has not been officially determined as navigable, and that based on enabling legislative language, it retains rights to submerged lands under navigable waterways that were part of the National Forest prior to statehood. This applies to all areas on these rivers

outside of the “Portage Window”, an area withdrawn from the Chugach National Forest in the 1940s for township purposes, and then returned to the CNF in 1992. The “Window” includes approximately the first mile of each of the three rivers.

Context

Forest Plan

There is little guidance that speaks directly to this issue, as the Forest Service already asserts ownership of these lands. Guidelines regarding land ownership state that the Forest Service should “emphasize acquisition of lands and interests in lands through willing parties that...are in or adjacent to specially designated areas (including but not limited to...rivers recommended for Wild, Scenic, or Recreational River designation...) (3-46).”

Public comments

The Alaska Railroad stated their interest in discussing possible easements or other cooperative efforts to manage access via the parking area on the ARRC right of way. The DNR ANILCA Implementation Program wrote to affirm the State’s assertion of ownership of submerged lands of navigable waters, which they argue includes all three of these rivers. At least one O/G has discussed the issue of who owns the Twentymile boat launch, since the Forest Service authorizes permits based on management authority of the launch. DNR is currently developing a permitting system for their general lands, but generally does not limit commercial use outside of state parks. The State also expressed their concern about setting any restrictions on public access to these waterways, such as limiting the types of boats or establishing a full allocation permit system.

Several members of the public commented that they would like the Forest Service to restrict use on these rivers, including banning jet skis and air boats, horsepower limits on motors, restricting motorized use to certain days, and prohibiting motor boats on Portage.

Recommendations

1. In order to best serve the public, the Forest Service should continue to manage the Twentymile boat launch and special use permits authorizing use of the three river systems unless state ownership is determined.
2. While recognizing a desire of some members of the public to prohibit certain types of recreational activities, the Forest Service should not attempt to restrict non-commercial public access on the waterways. This acknowledges the general atmosphere regarding access to public lands in Alaska and the overall satisfaction of river users, and also addresses one of DNR’s major concerns brought up during the evaluation process.
3. If serious safety or resource issues arise in the future, the Forest Service should work collaboratively with DNR to mitigate the problems.

Need 3: Protect the ecological integrity of the river systems

Issue 1: Manage the potential impact on fisheries and fish habitat

Background

All three rivers have been popular fishing destinations for decades, particularly the Twentymile. Most hooligan fishing takes place at the mouth of the Twentymile, while salmon fishing occurs further up Twentymile, in clear water sloughs flowing into the bottom third of Portage Creek, and in sloughs along Placer River. Most people use motorized boats when salmon fishing, though some walk in at Placer and float down Portage.

The impact of motor boats on spawning habitat, the status of the hooligan population, and the impact of fishing on salmon and hooligan harvests are the fisheries issues identified during this planning process. As mentioned earlier, there has been concern that hooligan populations are declining worldwide. Also, uncertainty remains about the effect of motorized boat traffic on Chinook salmon spawning. Finally, the status of the salmon and hooligan fisheries is uncertain.

Context

Forest Plan

Conservation of fish and wildlife is a critical goal in Chugach National Forest resource management. The goal of habitat management is to “maintain habitat to produce viable and sustainable wildlife populations that support the use of fish and wildlife resources for subsistence and sport hunting and fishing, watching wildlife, conservation, and other values” (3-4). Objectives pertaining to this goal are to provide educational information to avoid disruption to wildlife and to improve fish habitat quality to support wildlife and fisheries (3-5). Finally, both the Scenic River and Recreational River management areas state that “management of fisheries and riparian habitat will emphasize the maintenance of genetic diversity of wild indigenous fish stocks” (4-46).

Public comments

Given the current level of use and management of the fishery, ADF&G biologists are not concerned about the sustainability of any of the fish populations in the rivers, though concerns exist about how elevated levels of use could affect the Twentymile coho salmon fishery and require the need for future regulatory or management action. Federal fish biologists are concerned that the data needed to sufficiently understand the status of the various fish populations in this watershed is greatly lacking, making it very difficult to assess potential impacts on the fisheries resource associated with increased human use.

Comments received during public scoping argue that motor boats, especially high-powered jet boat traffic on the Twentymile system, are disrupting both fish and other wildlife. One person noted that he has observed a decline in the hooligan population over the past ten years, though

data is lacking to support or contradict this comment. Visitors to Twentymile felt that there had been a significant increase in the amount of people fishing during the coho salmon run over the past five years; many of these people were not happy about this increase. A private landowner also mentioned that the southern outlet of Portage Creek was impounded, harming the salmon population and changing river dynamics. He also expressed concern about increased pressure on the fishery on lower Portage Creek.

Recommendations

1. Continue to monitor Chinook salmon escapements and spawning habitat use in the Carmen River. If monitoring reveals that habitat is being degraded or a substantial decline in the Chinook salmon population occurs, the Forest Service should impose restrictions on trips up this section of the river system.
2. Initiate a study designed to investigate use by Chinook salmon in other areas of the Twentymile watershed outside of Carmen River. Such a study might reveal a greater area of use than what is currently known, helping alleviate concerns of human-caused impacts to the Carmen River populations.
3. Develop a map of boating routes to follow on Carmen River to help boaters avoid Chinook salmon spawning areas and make the map available to O/Gs and the public.
4. Work with the private landowner to remove the impoundment in Portage Creek.
5. Do not actively promote more fishing on Twentymile. This would include not authorizing additional commercially-guided fishing and maintaining current capacity at the parking lot if improvements are made.
5. Manage Placer River as an opportunity for non commercially-guided fishing trips.
6. Include information about fish habitat conservation and fishing practices on signage at access points.
7. Cooperatively work with ADF&G to conduct a study of the hooligan fishery. This study could act as a follow-up to the study done in the early 2000s.

Issue 2: Spreading of invasive weeds

Background

As more people travel these river corridors, there is an increased likelihood of the spread of invasive plants. Twentymile River, which has the most boat activity, also had the most invasives in plots studied along its banks. Observations and invasive plant mitigation in 2009 out at Spencer also show a marked increase in the number of invasive plants in that area, likely due to increased visitation and recreational infrastructure developments. These invasive hotspots have the potential to impact other areas in their respective watersheds.

Context

Forest Plan

One goal of Chugach National Forest management is to “maintain a full range of naturally occurring ecological processes and flora native to Southcentral Alaska” (3-3). Ecological processes should be mostly unaffected by human activity in all the applicable management areas except the Fish, Wildlife, and Recreation area, where these processes may be moderately affected.

Public comment

This issue did not come up in public comments during this planning process, though concerns were expressed by GRD Ecology staff members.

Recommendations

1. Improve awareness and active mitigation of spreading invasive plants at access points. This includes providing information about the issue on signs at key access points, especially at the Spencer Lake put-in and the Twentymile boat launch.
2. Consider placing washing stations at these locations.
3. Forest ecology staff should focus invasive plant mitigation efforts (weed pulls, treatment, etc.) in the three rivers area at access points, as this is where concentrated human activity takes place.
4. Work with private landowners and permittees to reduce invasives on private inholdings.

Issue 3: Understanding the causes of bank erosion

Background

Bank erosion has the potential to degrade fish habitat and can impact habitat for upland species as well. What is the impact of bigger wakes generated by high-powered motors on bank erosion? While it is easy to see the immediate effects of a larger wake, it is more difficult to gauge the influence that this disturbance has in a river system as dynamic as the glacial-influenced Twentymile system. State and federal biologists and hydrologists acknowledge the issue, but are skeptical that wakes make an overall substantial difference to bank stability in a naturally highly erosive environment.

Context

Forest Plan

Management areas for the three rivers area state that ecological processes should be largely unaffected by humans. The Plan also directs managers to protect and conserve fish habitat for subsistence and sport fishing.

Public comment

The issue of Twentymile bank erosion came up in both public comments and during the public meeting. These visitors observed that the soft, unstable river banks eroded much more when jet boats with high-powered motors went by. They were concerned about the impact on fish habitat.

Recommendations

1. Conduct a study to estimate the impact of wakes on bank erosion compared to natural erosion due to dynamic hydrology in the Twentymile River system.
2. Conduct a literature review to see what impacts wakes have had in comparable river systems.

4. Conclusions

Twentymile River, Portage Creek, and Placer River provide outstanding opportunities for visitors to enjoy a variety of recreational experiences. These river systems have been popular destinations for decades, and recreational use is expected to increase in the future. The Forest Service recognizes that management should adapt to meet the needs of increasing demands and pressures on the recreation and natural resources of the area. This document is an attempt to make informed recommendations to best manage these resources by gathering data through a number of sources including studies, monitoring efforts, and discussions with diverse stakeholders. Recommendations made in this document are the summation of all the gathered information.

While numerous recommendations are made here, they are made with the understanding that management actions should be at the minimum level necessary to meet the desired future condition. There are also limitations to what the Forest Service can do in managing these rivers due to limited agency resources and time, public and state sentiment regarding access restrictions, ongoing questions about jurisdiction of the waterways and Twentymile boat launch area, and the impacts of DOT's planning efforts on any recommendations concerning the access points.

Nonetheless, decisions based on recommendations in this document will impact river users. Outfitters and guides will potentially be impacted the most if a decision is made to limit commercial motorized trips to only Twentymile River and its current capacity. They may argue that they are being treated unfairly since non-commercial use is not being limited in the same way. But these restrictions are made as much to enhance non-motorized commercial opportunities as they are to reflect public concerns and provide quality non-commercial opportunities. If recommendations to add signage and monitor the rivers are implemented, visitors may have a greater sense that the rivers are being actively managed, which may impact their backcountry experience and sense of independence. These are the minimal steps, however, to ensure that the backcountry experience is preserved. Finally, a decision not to restrict non-commercial access, including the use of air boats, jet skis, and other motorized watercraft, may frustrate members of the public concerned about these types of use, and could lead to unhappiness with Forest Service management.

This plan is meant to be the next step in management of the Three Rivers, and must remain adaptable to changing conditions. Studies and monitoring recommended here are intended to provide additional information to assess current management actions and provide guidance on any changes that need to be made. Recognizing that time and resources are limited, not all of these recommendations will likely be implemented, at least not immediately. Gathering baseline data on non-commercial use on Portage and Placer is the most critical next step. Communication

with state agencies has been a strong point during the planning process, and the Forest Service should ensure that this is sustained. Proactive dialogue with DNR and ADF&G will continue to be important as recommendations are implemented, though it is likely that agencies will continue to disagree on a number of issues. The Forest Service should also maintain an active role in DOT's planning process for the Seward Highway, and adapt plans for the access points accordingly. Finally, the public's voice should remain central to management of the rivers, especially the recreation resource. Once this document is reviewed by the State and then approved by the Glacier District Ranger, it should be disseminated to interested parties for review and comment. This step may help to affirm management recommendations and will provide transparency to the evaluation process.

Some recommendations will not need further analysis before being implemented. These include decisions to initiate or continue monitoring, maintain the status quo on commercial opportunities, and fully implement the Twentymile safety plan. Further analysis, to include some level of environmental analysis, will be initiated if decisions are made to improve access points or to offer additional commercial opportunities.

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